



BARN CLOTHES

Marlene Wildeman

Sept 16, 1977
for Mum & Ed.

BARN CLOTHES

Marlene Wildeman

The Chores Are Done

My Father Who Art In Heaven

Six Weeks

Love
Marlene

©Marlene Wildeman 1977

Photography by Maggie Shore

Backcover graphic by Michel Blanchard.

Printed by Véhicule Press in Montréal, Québec.

THE CHORES ARE DONE

She comes up slow from the barn, the
red
kerchief bobs along the snow
bank.
Her boots pick their way
round rocks and
puddles of ice.

Steam rises out of a
pail she carries;
fresh milk
still warm.

The house is dark.

Cats on the back steps rise and stretch,
swagger down to meet her.
She tips
the milkpail, pours the white
stream.
Foam floats over the
edge
splashes
in the cracked china
bowl.

In the porch
the cream separator climbs an octave
sings a white river to the jar
waiting
hums a pulse of cream to the
pitcher,
whines back down
around
& stops.

She throws the rinse water out to the yard
scattering the cats,
knocks an icicle down with the broom
sweeps the step
goes in.

A light comes on in the house.

The chores are done.

This poem originally appeared in another form
in Room Of One's Own.

MY FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN

I

My sister and I
hitch-hiking home after
grass hockey practise
17 and 14, me older
hot September late afternoon
books and purse and gym strip
heavy on my arm
warm
sweating
only a half mile to go.

Two men in a jeep
stop for us,
neighbours.
We
crawl into the back
lift our skirts
laughing.
No one's told us.

One man leans out, shouts to us
as the jeep starts out-

You girls prepare yourselves,
your Dad's had an accident.

Our eyes meet in fear.
I begin and she joins me.

OUR FATHER
WHO ART IN HEAVEN
HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Behind her head
yellow and red maples blur and
blend with her hair-
it flies outside
beyond
the danger bond
between us.

WORLD WITHOUT END AMEN
OUR FATHER
WHO ART IN HEAVEN

The jeep stops at the driveway.
There are cars, too many cars
I know then
it must be bad.
We start to run
dodging cars parked at random.
Where's the dog?
My throat, oh God.

Inside,
the women
red eyes
aprons
white linen handkerchiefs
they stare at us, wish
they could spare us.

WHERE IS HE?

One
looks away
points to the bedroom.

II

At the bedroom door we come to a stop
together
two sisters framed
our mother in bed
her head
rolling from side to side
she opens her eyes
her mouth

I do not want to hear

No

Shut her up

Somebody shut her up

Shut her up!

Your Daddy's Dead!

My sister falls
someone is there.
I finger my mother's lipstick
turn it over and over
on the dresser top
my hand in the mirror
at the place
where her face would be.

She's in her glory now.
Final victory pose.
The throes of
one last
god-almighty migraine.

She gropes for us.

I can't move.

WHERE IS HE?

The doctor comes to me
takes my hands in his
offers his wet cheeks
as proof.

This room is too warm, too close
the blinds drawn
a crack of sunlight coming through
points to
the hypodermic lying on the window
sill
a fly caught behind the blind
dying

the blankets, gray wool
she's cold

in shock, he says

my fingers
cold, still inside his hands
my sister

screaming
on the floor

WHERE IS HE?

The doctor's face hangs
from his hairline
saddened.

Words
come from his mouth
like

boats
float to me

He didn't suffer. He died instantly.

He is on the road
flat on his back
upside down tractor
pins him to the ground
steering wheel driven through
his heart like a stake
my father who art in heaven
who art in heaven
who?

III

That'll teach him to break away—
leave the others behind
in their sawmills
their offices
that'll teach him.

You wanted to be your own boss.
Well are you?

no more sandwiches for lunch
no more foreman yelling down your neck
no more sawdust in your boots

No more, you bragged, not for me
I'm gonna be free.

Well, are you?

And us, what about us?
Didn't you think about us?

I'm sorry

DAD!

Where are you going?

Hands on me, grabbing me, stopping me.

No, you cannot go
to him. He's dead.
What good will it
do for you to see
him
like that?
I'll take my hands off
if you promise
not to go.

They cannot look at me, those
neighbours, they are curious-
ly embarrassed, they think
I'm mad; a trapped bird.

I walk
outside
back and forth
in the yard/on the hill/behind the barn

in and out of the milking parlour

it's milking time
the men are there
fumbling dropping pails
they will not let me help, they
shoo me away.

The cows are wild.

They know the smell,
blood & hysteria.

THEY KNOW ME. I COULD...

We'll take care of the chores tonight.
You just go away and relax now.

back to the hill
try to look down the road
try to see him

instead

the wheels of the killer
spin victorious, feet
high in the air

it holds my father down
blood seeps out
through his back
into the ground

WHY DON'T YOU TURN THE ENGINE OFF?

I wanted to go to you Dad.
They made me promise.

Does it hurt?

Are you watching me?

Are you still there in the body?

that body that skinny, bony body-
always too full of silage and
cowshit

I couldn't
sit on your lap anymore
engine grease all over your hands
smelly feet
Mum making you have a bath on Friday night

Dad!

Show me
some
thing.

If I pray?

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN

IV

They are calling me from the house
I have to go in now
my mother is awake

my mother
I hate her
it should have been him in that bed
alive
not her

Her fingers clutch at my wrist
tighten

pull at me
pull me
down
down

FOR GOD'S SAKE LET ME GO

I am not him
let me go

aaaaaaah

had to
get her eyes off me
they look for
traces of him
in me
she would kill
me
to bring him back

The priest takes her back to bed. A block and
tackle lifts that tractor off. The hearse comes,
and goes. The priest parks his car in the garage.
The chores are done. The last car leaves. It's
getting dark.

V

I sit at the kitchen table
stab my cigarette butts
into the ashtray.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust
if you don't get him buried
his heart will rust.

Priest at my elbow.

Your mother's asleep
and your sister too.
Is there anything I can do,
for you?

I'M OUT OF CIGARETTES FATHER
AND I DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY.

He tries to make me talk
on the way to the store.
It's dark in the car.
Yellow dashlights.
I hope the store is still open.

Be nice to the priest.

My silence scares him.

I don't have to break for him.
He has to accept me and
we both know it.

At the store, I stay in the car.
They look at me through the store window.
They know who I am.
They feel real good because they
feel real bad
only they
don't see it that way.

If you want to do something for me,
pay our grocery bill
and buy me some cigarettes.

He comes out with a carton, my brand.

Money from the collection plate.
Superannuation for believing all these years.

I'll give you a dollar if you pray for me.

Here, take my father
and buy me some cigarettes.

VI

That night in bed, I lie awake
eyes wide open
waiting for him
watching for him

he'll show up
he knows I need him
to be alive
somewhere

But all that comes

is

one green cat's eye
one green cat's eye

staring at me
a foot from my head
can't look at it
can't look away from it
it follows me when I
turn
over

I see it with my eyes shut.

I shouldn't be afraid, it
just watches me
too much
too close

It isn't him, I know it.
He wouldn't scare me like this.
I'm his kid.

That's enough, Dad.
Take it away now.
I've had enough.

DAD!

It stays
but not so close.

I can bear it now.

It doesn't scold
doesn't frown
doesn't smile
doesn't try to
crawl into my
eye
nothing
just is
no depth
no message
no meaning

Is that it?

Life?

Is that what you're trying to tell me?
Or are you a cat now?
Tell me!

These eyes

all the same
are there two

are there
three
now?

in the dark?

No.

Just one.

Go away now.

Let me sleep.

VII

In the morning the eye is gone.
I rise and dress and go down that dirt road,
force one foot after the
other
til I am there
standing over the bloodstain
sucked in the ground.

A pheasant shrieks from the bush
and I look to it, scan the
treeline-

they know my pain, those trees
they have suffered at his hands

He bulldozed forty acres,
died on the last five
my father

will they take me too?

Motionless gray sky

watching

Will they jump me
when I turn to go?

No. They are trees.

They would have to fall on me
and there are none here they are all
dead here
he
killed them
shoved them up together all
pushed together, into this
windrow of
broken arms and legs-
he was going to burn them.

An eye for an eye.

He did it.
I didn't do anything.
I didn't...

Look back
over my
shoulder
walk fast
up the road.

VIII

My sister is up when I get back,
wants to go to where it happened.

DON'T BE AFRAID WHEN YOU'RE THERE.
I'VE JUST BEEN THERE AND IT'S ALL
RIGHT.

WE'RE SAFE.

She doesn't understand.

She too will have to make peace.

I watch her disappear around the bend.
A car comes, passes slowly
respectfully
by,
disappears around the bend
after her
but why?
No one lives past our place.
Where is he going?
Who is this?
Someone smelling out the death?

I meet her at the corner
running hard both of us

DID HE TOUCH YOU?

NO.

DID HE DO ANYTHING?

NO.

He turns the car around.

He's coming back.

I push her off to the house.

GET INSIDE AND WATCH.
PHONE THE COPS IF HE TRIES ANYTHING.

But he won't.

A power grows up slow
inside me
comes off me in
sparks
that would burn him.

The tires stop dry in the gravel.
He rolls the window partway
down, leaves the door
locked.

I know him. He lives in town.

Some young punk of a logger
come to look at the blood.
He's drunk.
A rim of dirt and cheap wine
purple
runs along his lip.
Glazed blue eyes
fill with tears
spill
down over
his death-afraid
face.

I didn't mean to scare her
honest, I was just
going to tell her I was
sorry
about your Dad.
I just opened the car door and she
ran off, I
didn't do anything, I just
feel sorry
about your
Dad.

GET OUT OF HERE.

Please, I

GET OUT OF HERE.

She comes out on the porch
when the car is gone, stares after it
holds herself.

She didn't have time to make her peace.

I try to hold her.
She pulls away.

IX

At the Funeral Parlour
my aunt and uncle decide
we will have the coffin open
they have done a good job on his face
where the tractor left its mark.

My Brother
home from Ontario
steps into place
Man of the Family.

We stand behind him,
my sister and I.

My Mother stands across.

I watch them closely.
My mother has been stronger since
he came. Is this her private wish?
My brother in my father's place?

The price, dear brother, the price...

An eye for an eye.

I know.
I have seen the eye,
see it now through the skin of his
forehead
he knows what's going on.

Go ahead.
Mount the silver steps to
his place.

An eye for an eye.

X

In the Coffin, my father lies quiet
his face re-built and smoothed over
with make-up
pink make-up
like I wear
covering the gray

hiding what's there.

It is my turn at the Coffin.
His hands are folded on his chest.

to cover the wound?
pretend it's not there?

I touch his hand.
The cold crosses
into my palm.

I don't have to pull my hand away.
I am safe
I am clean
I know about the eye and
I have nothing to hide.

They have laid him in white silk,
made him wear his Sunday suit.

He should be lying in dirt
wearing overalls
in a wooden box made of plywood and
two by fours
with cowpies and
flies
and instead of flowers, people,
bring
milkpails
and nails
and lumber
and potato champagne in a shot glass
and a can of tobacco
and Vogue papers
and his '22 rifle
and a lunchbox with
rice pudding...

XI

On the way to the cemetery, my mother remembered
he'd always said he wanted to be cremated.

Outraged aunt says
don't tell anybody
such a thing,
against the teachings of the Church!

But if it was what he wanted?

Nobody listened to me.
When my brother came home,
nobody listened.

I wanted an autopsy.

Be quiet, you. If they find out it was a heart attack,
there'll be no insurance for your mother. It has to be
a farm accident.

But we'll never know...

Open the gate to the graveyard
narrow, knobby, ragged road
first car after the hearse
no wind
pale sky
about to cry

Five brothers, one brother-in-law
stand over the grave,
five straight backs and
one that shakes.
The wife cried, and the little sister, but not that son,
and not that older one.

I had to cry a little in Church, Dad.
Lucille from school, and Kathy
they were crying.
It's what they expect.
They'd think I didn't
love you.

Dad?

XII

They started throwing dirt on the coffin
everyone
walking by, dropping handfuls of dirt.
That old woman
her black scarf
the rosary beads

go one by one

one by one

one by one

Do they know why they're throwing that dirt?

I'm sorry I complained
last week
about getting the wood in.

Dad?

It's my turn now.

They watch my face.

My fist opens
the ground drops out
a stone
hits the coffin
bounces off.

That's me Dad, that stone.
I'll be all right.

Not crying is as good as being hysterical.
They watch my face.

Shovels struck in a pile of dirt
lift and thud
lift and thud

OK Dad. Good-bye.

Lift and thud.
Lift
and thud.

SIX WEEKS

They were playing cards for the third night in a row. Jake shuffled the cards as fast as he could; before Anna could say she didn't want to play anymore. She got up and put another stick of wood in the stove.

"This stuff doesn't burn very good," she said.

"I know. There's a leak in the woodshed. I just noticed it this morning. Come on, your hand's dealt."

Anna looked out the window as she pulled up her chair. "It's stopped snowing. You could fix it tomorrow."

"What?"

"The leak."

"Yeah, yeah. I will. Play."

Anna dropped the eight of spades.

"Fifteen-for-two!" cried Jake, putting a seven on it.

Anna played a six, knowing if he had a face card he would win the game.

"Thirty-one!" cried Jake, throwing down the King of Clubs. "Look at this...8, 7, 6. That's three points you missed. You have to watch." He started to gather the cards. Suddenly he stopped and looked at her.

"You're not just letting me win, are you?" he asked. He picked the seven of Hearts from the edge of the ashtray, where it had come to rest.

Anna hesitated, long enough to unsettle him, then answered, "Of course not."

Jake finished gathering the cards and shuffled them again, looking at her once or twice. Anna took the tobacco can from the window ledge and rolled herself a smoke. She took her time.

When she was ready to light it, Jake was waiting for her, the cards propped in his fist like a fan. He drummed his fingers lightly on the table top, til she looked at him; then he stopped.

Anna looked at her cards, wishing she didn't have to play, wishing Jake were more like other men; men who occupied themselves tinkering with engines, alone, or built useless wooden knick-knacks in the basement, alone. Jake had never been like that. Always, he had to drag her into a game of cards, or Monopoly, or checkers. He couldn't spend time with himself. Afraid of what he'd find there. It was his turn to play first.

He played a four, she played a King, he played an Ace and said, "Fifteen-for-two," politely. He pegged his two points. Anna dragged slowly on her cigarette, leaning back in her chair.

"Your turn," reminded Jake.

Anna put the cigarette in the corner of her mouth, squinching up her face to keep the smoke out of her eye. "Twenty-five," she said, playing a Queen.

"Thirty-one!" cried Jake, throwing down his six of Hearts. "Hah! Better watch it. I'm going to skunk you yet," he said, and noticing her face twisted up, away from the smoke, he added, "I wish you wouldn't..."

"Wouldn't what?" asked Anna, taking the cigarette from her mouth.

Jake squirmed, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. Anna waited, watching him.

"Wouldn't what, Jake?" she asked again.

It didn't occur to him to lie.

"...wouldn't let your cigarette hang out of your mouth...like that. You don't look very nice...it..." He should have let it go at that. He knew enough to. "It makes you look tough, like a man."

At the back of the stove, the kettle whistled softly. The cold water tap dripped steadily into the sink.

Anna took her cigarette and balanced it precariously on the edge of the table. Jake watched it nervously, afraid it would fall, or else burn the table. Anna watched him. The cigarette smoke curled up in the air between them. When Jake had dealt the cards, Anna got up.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To bed."

"But I've just dealt another hand..." he said to her disappearing back. He waited a few minutes, examined the old scar on his left thumb, pushed the ashes around in the ashtray, then he gathered the cards and put them away, along with the cribboard, on the windowsill. He switched off the kitchen light and forgetting to fix the stove for the night, he made his way through the darkened living room to the bedroom, and Anna.

In the morning, the house was especially cold. Jake woke up first and made a fire in the kitchen stove. It had been out for hours. He took the kettle and ran water in it at the sink. Outside on the window ledge, the thermometer read twenty below.

He put the kettle at the front of the stove, hoping to appease her with a cup of hot coffee before they went out to milk. He rolled himself a smoke and took his usual twenty minutes on the toilet - smoking and thinking and doing his business. That's what he called it; doing his business. He wondered when Anna did hers. Sometime during the day, he knew, but never when he was around. She was a very private person. He said that to other people when he could sense they didn't like her. She is a very private and very touchy person, he would tell them. Then he would leave...quietly, humbly, and vaguely proud, but not sure why.

Anna swung her legs out of bed and sat there a few minutes, yawning and picking the sleep out of her eyes. There was the washing to do this morning, so it could hang out on the line to freeze stiff. It seemed colder than usual, too.

She stood up and stretched, pushing her shoulders back and cracking the back of her neck. She crossed over to the dresser for her glasses, hurrying over the cold blue linoleum. She put on her clothes, the ones she had worn the day before, except for her thermal underwear. This she changed.

Jake came out of the bathroom as Anna walked into the kitchen. He took a step toward her but then turned aside, as though he'd changed his mind.

At the stove, Anna stood warming her hands. He stepped up beside her. She spoke before he could.

"Don't forget it's washday," she said.

"Oh. Uh...I did forget," he said. He took the poker and began stoking the fire.

"What's the kettle doing on?" she asked.

"Ah, I thought you might like a coffee." He hung up the poker. She said nothing. He put his hands on his hips.

"Do you want one?" he asked.

"I heard you the first time, Jake," she said, walking to the basement door. "Why is it you think I want one *this* morning? I never have coffee before we go out to milk." She stared at him.

"I just thought...it's really cold, twenty below. I could make instant..."

She reached into the basement stairwell, grabbed his coveralls from a hook and handed them to him.

"So you don't want a coffee then?"

"No Jake. I don't want a coffee." She pointed to the clock on the wall. Quarter to five. "The cows are waiting. Let's go."

They finished putting on their barn clothes and stepped outside. The Collie came out from under the porch. Jake headed for the buildings huddled in the dark at the edge of the bush. Anna patted the dog. She waited until the barn lights came on, then she set out, stepping where Jake had stepped in the new snow.

After milking, Anna left Jake to feed the calves while she went up to the house to start breakfast. She was almost to the back steps when she heard the dull thud of his body hitting the ground. The scream wound up into the gray morning sky. In the front yard, soft mounds of snow fell from the big cedar.

When Anna got to him, he was unconscious. His right leg was twisted out from the hip. His hands gripped the handles of the overturned milkpails. The warm milk had sunk swiftly into the snow, leaving the calves sucking hungrily at the railing. The Collie

whined and paced nervously, keeping a few feet away.

Anna dropped to her knees and pulled Jake up by the shoulders. His mouth hung open. His warm breath made a mist in the air. Then she was up, and running, for the house and the telephone.

In the hospital waiting room, a man approached Anna with his hand outstretched.

"Mrs. Fletcher?" He grabbed for her hand awkwardly. She had not extended hers and he misjudged the distance.

"I'm from the dairy," he explained. "One of your neighbours called us. I've come to see what we can do to help. How long do they expect to keep Jake in the hospital?"

"Have you got a cigarette?" she asked.

"Oh excuse me...I'm sure I..." He fumbled in his jacket pockets and finally produced a pack of filter tips. She took a cigarette and he lit it for her.

"Would you like to sit down?" he asked, motioning to the worn wooden benches.

"He'll be in here six weeks," said Anna, still standing, "Just what is the dairy prepared to do?"

"Six weeks, eh? Well, we'll get you a hired hand to start with." He put his hands in his pockets. "Then if you need anything, you just give us a call and we'll see what we can do."

"How do you go about getting a hired hand?"

"We have a couple of retired guys we use for things like this. Right now though, one of the guys in the office is looking for a temporary job for his nephew." He explained, "He's visiting from Calgary. He's not a herdsman or anything, but he did grow up on a farm and apparently he knows how to milk cows." He looked for Anna's response.

She stood, smoking, arms crossed, staring at the floor.

"I've met him myself," he offered, "and..." Anna cut him off. "Can he start tonight?"

When Anna came in from the barn, late, because she had milked alone, he was standing beside his car. She knew he was watching her. She walked toward him at her usual pace, keeping her head down. When the man said nephew, she thought he'd be young, twenty maybe, or twenty-five. This one was close to forty. They nodded hello.

"I guess you're Anna," he said.

No one had called her Anna for years. It caught her slightly off guard. She changed what she was going to say.

"Are you the hired hand?" she asked. She looked him full in the face for the first time. Been loved by a lot, she thought. Probably some who would call him handsome.

"Mike's my name," he said. She watched him lean across the front seat to get his suitcase. He knew she was looking.

He slammed the car door and dropped the keys in his pocket. "Guess I don't need to lock up way out here."

Anna turned and walked towards the house. "We never do," she said, over her shoulder. "And there's the dog. He'll bark if someone comes." She looked for the dog then. He was at the back steps, waiting.

While Anna brushed the snow off her boots with the broom, Mike stooped to stroke the dog. She looked at the two of them, then handed Mike the broom.

In the kitchen, Anna pointed to the door leading to the upstairs. "The room's up there. There's a vent by the foot of the bed. You'd better go now and open it so it warms up before you go to bed. The bathroom's in here." She swung her arm around to the right. "I'll put out a towel for you. I wash on Mondays. You can put your dirty clothes in the wash machine over there. I guess that's all." She walked past him to the basement door. "Oh. I'd

like it if you wouldn't smoke in bed."

Mike took his suitcase upstairs. She could hear him moving around; opening the closet door, testing the bed, dropping his shoes on the floor.

Anna hung up her coat and scarf, then stepped out of her coveralls and hung them on the nail. She leaned against the basement door. What was his name? Mike? That was it. Mike. She spotted the cribbage board and cards on the windowsill.

She sped across the kitchen, grabbed the cards and the board, and buried them under old rags at the back of the linen cupboard.

When he came back down, Anna was sitting at the table, smoking. "Smoke?" she asked, shoving the can across to him.

He unscrewed the silver lid and began to roll a cigarette. He knew how to do it, even if he did come from the city and carry filter tips in his pocket.

"Something I learned when I was ten," he said, sticking the cigarette in his mouth. She tossed him her matches.

She watched the fire light up his face. No frown lines. Not a worrier. He looked up then and Anna turned away, just in time. She was out of practice. With Jake, she always knew just when to look away.

That night in bed she remembered his tongue going lazily across the cigarette paper. She woke

That night in bed she remembered his tongue, and how it went lazily across the cigarette paper. She woke up twice in the night, once after reaching for Jake and not finding him.

"Were you warm enough?" she asked, when he came downstairs in the morning.

"Not really," he said, shivering. He came and stood next to her at the stove, spreading his hands to warm them. Anna stepped back, into the basement stairwell.

"You can wear these to milk in." She handed him Jake's coveralls. "I think they'll fit."

She closed the basement door. "There's an old heater down there somewhere. I'll dig it up later on, this afternoon. I've got more blankets too."

The Collie followed them along the path to the barn.

When they had finished milking, Anna took Mike up to the hayloft. She stood and watched while he threw the bales down to the feeding area.

After a few minutes, he stopped and smiled at her. "Why don't you go on up to the house? I can finish this by myself."

She went back down the ladder then, calling up to him, "Be careful when you feed the calves. That's where he slipped."

Anna walked quickly then, from the barn to the house. She stirred up the coals in the stove, put more wood on, and moved the kettle forward to boil.

In the bathroom sink, she washed her hands, then her arms, up to the elbow. She soaped her face and rinsed it with cold water. She took a fresh facecloth, the green one she liked. Carefully, she washed around her eyes. She rinsed the cloth and hung it up to dry. Then she looked in the mirror.

Her eyes were small, blue and hard. No eyebrows to speak of. Pale lashes. Nothing to soften the force of her.

Not many people looked in those eyes. Jake, sometimes.

She was fifty. Wore no make-up. Never had.

"An eye is an eye, and a mouth is a mouth!" she had shouted, so they say, through the locked screendoor to the surprised woman selling cosmetics. "They're not ornaments. Now take that garbage and get out of my yard."

Anna saw in the mirror, the tiny lines curving down at the corners of her mouth. They were there all the time now, those lines.

The first time she noticed them was when Jake's sister, Emily, came from Ontario to visit. Emily arrived with her bags and her busy-ness and the first thing she said to Anna was, "You're looking a little worn. You should get out more often... maybe."

Anna was thirty-three then. While she looked at herself in the mirror that night, a second Anna watched from the door, arms crossed, absolutely refusing to have anything to do with herself.

After waiting impatiently a few minutes, the one at the door called the one in the mirror, and the one in the mirror obeyed. The two came stiffly together. Anna took herself back to Jake and his sister.

There had been good times, but Anna was hard pressed to remember them. She remembered the time Jake forgot her in town, and drove all the way home before he realized. She remembered the night of the Watson girl's wedding dance. Some boys paid the butcher's son Ronald to dance with her, and watched while he tried to put his hand on her breast. Jake coaxed her back in the Hall, said it was all her imagination. An hour later he was over there drinking with them. She remembered all right.

Now she counted on Jake for his name, his farm, and his nervous attendance — nothing else.

At the last dance she went to, the people dancing turned into a bevy of heavy-footed, sweating, overweight geese. And there was Jake, right in the centre.

She knew they wondered about her...she had no children and they didn't know why. No one had ever seen her in Church. At the store, she hurried and got her groceries and left, never stopped to talk.

She didn't qualify. And she didn't care.

There was one woman, years before, living on the old Harrison place. Mildred, her name was.

Mildred Cooper. *She* had something to say when she opened her mouth. But she was gone, she moved, back to her family in Kansas when her husband died. She wrote twice, short letters, didn't say much.

Anna leaned back from the sink and looked through the kitchen window, down to the barn. Mike came out with pails of milk for the calves. She went back then, to the mirror.

In the store one year, two women were talking in the next aisle over.

"She's unbelievable," one said, "Not a word or a smile out of her, and there I was, standing right in front of her saying hello. You won't find me doing that again, that's for sure."

"She's got her problems, I suppose," said the other.

"That's no excuse for the way she behaves. And anyway, what problems?"

"A husband like hers?"

"What do you mean? Jake's a nice enough guy. At least he says hello to a person."

"He is a bit of a fool though."

"Well we can't all be..."

There it was. Anna had married a fool and there were those who knew it.

Anna narrowed her eyes in the mirror. The skin pinched in at the top of her nose. She let it go and saw the lines nearly disappear. She slapped her cheeks to draw some colour, but she didn't wait around to see if any came.

In the bedroom she stepped out of her pants and undid her shirt. She took off the rough thermal undershirt and pulled a clean one down over her small breasts. Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she stopped. She was like a boy, pressed in behind the snug undergarment. She looked at herself from one side, then the other. She took the undershirt off, folded it and put it back in the drawer. She found a soft cotton one she had worn only once. It wasn't as warm as the others. She looked at herself wearing this. At least you can tell I have breasts, she thought.

She reached into the closet for a clean shirt. She had trouble deciding which one to wear, one was too scratchy, one too bulky, another needed mending. She stopped all of a sudden and stared at the green cotton blouse under her hand. If any could be said to be pretty, this was the one. So. She was dressing for him.

Anna sank slowly to the bed. In thirty years of marriage, she hadn't looked at another man, much less let one affect her this way. And she was ten years older than him. She couldn't afford to forget that. Hot tears dropped to her cheeks, like a first rain hitting dry dirt. She pushed them away and jumped up. She grabbed the largest, roughest, oldest shirt and fastened herself into it. She pulled on the gray chino pants she always wore in the house and went out towards the kitchen.

She was halfway through the living-room when she heard him start up the basement stairs. She stopped, stepped to one side, and waited til he'd gone through the kitchen to the bathroom.

She appeared then, in the kitchen. She lifted the stove lid and with the poker, stoked the fire until it was going good, until it was time to start breakfast, until her hand became steady. When he came out, the porridge was cooking, the coffee was perking at the back of the stove, and the pan was ready for eggs.

Mike stood in the bathroom doorway, drying his hands. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to the elbow. There was a soft sheen to the underbelly of his arms.

Referring to the chores, he said, "That wasn't so bad." She could tell he was smiling, though her eyes stayed on the eggs she was cracking into the mixing bowl. "Is it pretty much the same every morning?"

She looked at him, nodded and looked back to the eggs.

"You know..." he said, leaning back and flinging the towel to the rack, "It's kind of hard to get you to talk. You always like this? Or is it me?"

He stood waiting for her answer while she set the plates down on the table. "I don't..." She moved the salt and pepper shakers. "...waste words." He waited. She turned to face him. "And it's not very often I'm alone in the house with a man, besides my husband."

"I figured that was it," he said, passing behind her, so close she could feel his shirt brush against hers. Without asking where to sit, he slid into Jake's place.

"How long do they plan to keep him in the hospital?"

"About six weeks. He'll have to be in traction. More toast?"

"No thanks. I've had enough." He looked out the window. "I guess if it had to happen, now was as good a time as any. Not much to do in the winter, when the chores are done." Thinking of the cards, safely tucked away, Anna quickly agreed. "It could have been rough - if it had happened during haying, or something," he said, reaching for the tobacco can on the windowsill. "Mind if I have one of these? I like the stronger ones once in a while. They're more satisfying, if you know what I mean."

Anna nodded, a little too quickly, and motioned for him to help himself. Then she thought somehow he was making fun of her but she couldn't get hold of it, so she let it go. She watched him roll the cigarette. He saw her looking when he licked the paper, and she got up to clear the dishes.

She started the truck, when the dishes were done, and drove along the road to show him the extent of the property. They got out and walked over to the fence. He gave her one of his filter tips and lit it for her. Then they stood looking down at the river with its backdrop of purple winter trees and mounding white aprons of snow. Anna put her hands in her pockets to keep them warm, letting her lips climb around her cigarette til it was held securely in the corner of her mouth. Mike leaned against the fence, balancing one foot on the bottom wire.

"Somebody lives over there I guess...where the smoke's rising out of the bush?"

"Yeah, an old man. Lives by himself in a cabin. He's the nearest neighbour."

"That's quite a ways from here. What do you do if something happens?" Mike turned to her. His eyes went right to the cigarette in the corner of her mouth, then moved away.

"Nothing out of the ordinary ever happens around here." She took the cigarette and calmly flicked it into the snow. "Jake falling is the first thing that's happened in thirty years." Across the river the smoke lay against the mountain, still, as if in a photograph.

"It's about ten miles to that guy's place, half of them on an old logging road. I think about him sometimes in the winter, keep an eye out for the smoke. There's others." She pointed. "Over there, two families. They have the phone too."

"Do you visit?"

Anna shook her head. "Never was one for socializing." She tapped her foot against the fencepost. "Jake now, he's different. It won't surprise me a bit if he comes home wanting to sell and move to town. He'll say he can't get around like he used to, with his hip."

"And will you agree to sell?"

"Nope."

"That's definite."

"I've been here thirty years. I like this place. I don't want to leave here and move to town." Anna brushed the snow off a boulder with her boot. They

were quiet a few minutes. She waited what she thought was a decent interval before suggesting they go back and get some work done.

"Anna," Mike grabbed her as she turned to go. "What will they say, those neighbours?"

She looked at his hand on her arm. "Whatever they please, I guess. That's what neighbours are for, isn't it? To talk?" She strode through the snow to the truck. "They'd have something to say no matter who you were or where you came from and probably, even if you'd brought a wife and kids along."

She flung open the truck door and got in. When Mike's door was closed, she shifted smoothly into first gear and the truck pulled out for home.

For supper that night she made chicken and rice, taking the trouble to cut the onions fine. He seemed to like it...had second helpings, and then they sat, smoking, with the dirty dishes still on the table. It seemed to her a long time since either had spoken. Maybe fifteen minutes.

The log in the stove was wet; it hissed and whined as it burned. She would have to show him where to get the dry wood. She wished he would say something. She listened to the whirr of the electric clock on the wall above the sink. She could have started the dishes but she didn't really want to get up just then. She was afraid to look at him, in case he was watching her. She looked instead, at her nicotine-stained fingers.

The Collie barked once, giving her something to look at out the window, but then he stopped and she heard him go back under the porch. The fridge motor started up, rumbled a few minutes and stopped.

She was rolling another cigarette when the icicle fell past the window and shattered on the ice below. Tobacco and paper flew up out of her hands and into her plate. She looked at it, then at Mike. He was trying not to laugh.

"Scared ya, huh?"

She almost smiled back. She got up then, and put the dishes in the sink, except for her own plate which she took over to the stove. She scraped the

tobacco and paper and leftovers into the fire and when she put the stove-lid back, she realized he had come up behind her. She felt his fingers on the back of her neck, stroking her. She didn't move.

He kept stroking her, waiting for her response.

She set the plate and fork on the enamel stove shelf. Mike put his hand under her chin and turned her head.

At 4:30 a.m., the alarm clock rang. Anna stirred but didn't move to shut it off. She expected Jake to get it. Gradually Mike realized the clock was on his side. He felt around on the floor for it. Then Anna remembered. She flung herself across him, silencing the clock. She extricated herself like a cat, lifting her paws.

"I thought you were him," she said, "He always gets the clock." She threw back the covers and swung her legs out.

"Wait a minute," he said, taking hold of her arm. "What time is it?"

"4:30."

"Oh God. I can't. I can't get up yet. Just a little longer. Five minutes."

Anna let him draw her back, close to him. He dropped his arm across her waist, then his leg across her hip. She looked down at herself, pinned.

Into her hair, he said, "This is the way I like to wake up, nice and easy. I don't like to shoot out of bed when the alarm goes. Maybe you could keep the clock over on your side from now on." He pressed his lips against her ear. "What do you think?"

She pulled herself out from under his leg, turned onto her stomach and faced the wall. Before she spoke, she chose her words carefully.

"I think you take too much for granted."

He flinched. "What?"

She said again, "You take too much for granted. There hasn't been anybody but my husband for nearly..."

"What?" He interrupted, "Anna, what did I..."

"Nothing. Listen to me. For nearly thirty years, I have slept only with...my husband. You're moving too fast to suit me. Do you understand?" Before he could answer, she said, "You will keep to your own room, except when we...decide to...sleep together."

"OK Anna. Whatever you say." He played with the hair at the back of her neck but she tensed, so he stopped. She was a deer at the edge of a clearing, ready to bolt and run. He wanted to steady her, but he didn't know what she needed.

"Anna," he said, moving her so they faced each other. "You'll have to tell me how you want me to be with you. I don't want to scare you, but I might, accidentally. If I do, you'll have to tell me, right away."

She said nothing for a few minutes. Then she said, "Don't hold me down like that, with your leg. I don't like that."

"All right, I won't. You know, we only have six weeks. It's up to us how we spend it."

"Yes." She did know. After six weeks he would leave and she would never see him again. The neighbours...the people in town...they would never know. She smiled to herself. No one would ever suspect her of loving. Loving. What she had with Jake, that wasn't loving, that was surviving. It had never been love. They had thought she was pregnant. There was a quick wedding, and no baby, not ever, never had been. Now it was thirty years they had...

"What are you thinking about?" asked Mike.

"Nothing. Just...you're right. We've only got six weeks." Six weeks.

A pick-up truck drove into the yard one Sunday afternoon. Anna didn't see or hear it. They were asleep in her bedroom. The Collie barked. Anna woke up and listened. She heard the truck door slam. She hurried into the living room and through the gauze inner curtains she saw Mrs. MacPherson and Mrs. Schmidt making their way through the snow to the back porch. They carried, in their arms, brown bags of baking — goodwill baking for the woman who's husband was still in the hospital with a broken hip.

Anna stood perfectly still while they knocked on the back door. She knew what she was supposed to do, ask them in for tea, and serve them not theirs, but her own, home-made buns. She thought of Mike asleep in the bedroom and he appeared then, at the bedroom door. She motioned for him to come over

quickly. He tip-toed across and peeked out the window. The women were deliberating whether or not the Collie would get into the food if they left it on the steps. Mike suddenly grabbed Anna and pushed her up to the window, where he gleefully put both hands on her breasts. She let out a quickly smothered whoop of surprise, and struggling, they fell to the floor, laughing hysterically behind their hands.

Mrs. Schmidt looked up at the empty window.

Mike and Anna lay still on the floor, each one covering the other's mouth. When the voices passed by under the window, they scrambled up to the triangle of glass in the front door. The women were putting the baking in the mailbox. Then Mrs. MacPherson turned the truck around while Mrs. Schmidt wrote a note, which she shoved partway under the rubber mat on the back steps.

Sunday,

Dear Mrs. Fletcher,

We came by on a social call but you must have been out walking, as we noticed the truck in the garage. Some of us got up some baked goods to make your load a little lighter during this trying time. You'll find them in the mailbox, out of reach of the dog. Hope Jake is home to you soon.

All the best,

Etta Schmidt,
on behalf of the Ashton Creek Ladies Club

Anna took the stairs up to Jake's room on the third floor. She arrived slightly out of breath.

"You're looking well," he said, smiling, when she walked in. "Watcha' got there?" He pointed to the brown bag.

"Baked goods," she answered, bringing them out and setting them on the movable tray which spanned his chest.

"You shouldn't have made so much Anna," he said, watching her unpack it. "It'll get stale before I can eat it all."

Anna brought more buns, and a pie, out of the bag. Afraid he'd angered her, Jake quickly explained.

"I don't mean to sound ungrateful. I'm sure you must have put a lot of work into..."

"It's all right," she said, "I didn't bake this. Mrs. Schmidt and Mrs. MacPherson came by with it one day, when I was out walking."

"You go out walking?"

"Sometimes."

"You didn't use to."

"It gives me something to do. Breaks the monotony. There's no one to play cards with."

"He doesn't play cards?"

"No."

They were quiet a few minutes.

"And how are the dear ladies from Ashton Creek?" he asked, suddenly. "Oh that's right. You weren't home."

Anna looked at him. He lay partly turned away from her. His right hand plucked absent-mindedly at a nubbin of wool in the blanket.

"No, I was out walking," she said again. She pitied him then, so bored, not able to get out of bed. She felt guilty about only going once a week to see him. Still, twenty miles was a long drive in the winter, on those roads. And apparently he had other regular visitors.

Trying to cheer him up, she told him about the baking in the mailbox. "I had to laugh when I saw it...half of it sticking out. The dog could have reached it anyway, if he'd really wanted to. I guess he's not too fond of raisin pie."

"No. It's not his favourite, is it?" Jake said. He reached over to the bedside table for a Kleenex and dabbed at his nose.

"Getting a cold?" asked Anna, genuinely concerned.

Jake shook his head. "Well, maybe a bit of a cold. I don't know." He tossed the Kleenex into the wastebasket. "That is a lot of baking."

"I thought you might like to give some to the other men in here."

Jake looked around the room. "That's good of you Anna," he said, his voice beginning to break, "very good of you. I've missed you." He motioned with his head for her to come closer. Anna could not make herself move over to him.

She didn't like public displays of affection and he knew it. She shifted her weight to her other foot, hoping he would pull himself together.

"I got the hired hand to..." she began, but before she could finish, Jake's hand reached for her. Because of the constraints of the traction, his hand missed her and flopped to the bedside, like a fish kept from water.

A mixture of dignity and disgust moved her to Jake's side. To save them both, she put her hand on his shoulder. He was satisfied then. She watched her hand rise up and down with his breathing. He asked about the hired hand.

"You got him to do what?"

"He fixed the leak in the shed roof. The fire burns good now. We moved all the wet wood into the basement and stacked it near the furnace to dry out."

"Not too close to the furnace, I hope. Well, that's good. Sounds like you're getting along with him OK. I was a little worried you two might not hit it off. I'm glad he hasn't been any trouble for you. You know Boyd, over at the dairy? No? Well anyway, he dropped in here one day. He says this guy's a likeable sort, and dependable. Dependable. Says he's a hard worker."

"Oh yes. He keeps himself busy."

"He doesn't...you know...bother you, does he?"

Anna shook her head, staring at the red tips of her rubber boots.

"Don't be afraid to say, if..."

"He doesn't bother me, Jake." She looked directly at him.

"Good." Jake fingered the crust of one of the pies.

"Good. Hey! I've got an idea. How about taking a piece of this to that old guy over there, in the corner. He's a real nice old man and nobody ever comes to see him. "Here..." He pulled open a drawer of the bedside table.

"I've got a plate in here, saved part of my sandwich at lunch. And I think there's a fork here too. Sure. There it is. You can cut it with the fork eh? Just a little piece, and take it over to him.

"No Jake. I don't want to. The nurse can do it at supertime."

"Aw c'mon. It won't hurt you, just this once." He lowered his voice. "Nobody ever brings him anything. He'd love you for it."

"I don't need him to love me for it," she said, taking a step back from the bed.

"Yeah but he..." Jake could see it was no use. He had forgotten how stubborn she could be. Being in the hospital let him forget how it was sometimes between them. He should have known she wouldn't want to take the old man some pie. It wasn't something she would want to do.

Anna stood playing with her purse strap. She knew if Jake could have got out of bed he would have gone over with the pie. She wondered if maybe she should have done it, just this once. But the moment had passed. Anyway the old man would never know the difference, and Jake...he'd get over it. She looked at her watch.

"I have to go pretty soon Jake. I still have to get groceries and the store will be closed in an hour."

"Don't go yet, please."

"I have to Jake. I just told you the store will be closed."

"Did you drive yourself in?"

"No. He drove. He's over at the feedstore now, loading up the truck."

"Well, I have to go." She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. "Don't go getting out of bed before they tell you."

"Who me? I'm not gonna get better til I have to. No sir, not me. Hey Anna, have you got any rollies on you? They won't let me roll any in here. Can't have tobacco on the sheets, you know." He pointed to the bedside table. "I have to smoke these damn filters."

Anna opened her purse. A package of Mike's cigarettes lay beside her empty cigarette case. "No, I don't have any rolled. I'll bring you some next time I come. OK? Bye now." She waved from the door to the ward.

Jake called after her, 'When? When are you coming back?' But she didn't hear him. She was already too far away.

Anna ran up the steps and into Shepherd's Feeds. Frank Shepherd raised his head from the seed packages he was sorting. Anna Fletcher. Not someone you saw a lot of. She closed the door and leaned against it.

"Ready to go?" called Mike from across the room. Anna nodded quickly.

Mike turned back to Frank. "Everything squared away here?"

"Everything squared away," said Frank, "Yep, squared away." He held the match low to the pipe and sucked the flame into it.

Anna put her hand on the doorknob. Mike moved towards her then, buttoning his coat. At the door he turned and bid farewell to Frank, then closed the door behind the two of them.

Frank tossed another package into the box labelled "Old Seeds - Half Price."

"Good Lord, Frank. You mean to say you never asked about her husband?" Betty Shepherd shook her head. "Honestly. Sometimes I wonder where your head is."

Mike turned the truck onto the bridge leading out of town. "How was it?" he asked.

"Oh, same as usual for the most part," said Anna. She looked at him. "He asked about you."

"About me?" He drove off the bridge and onto the Trinity Creek Road.

"Wanted to know if you've been...you know...bothering me."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him the truth. I said you don't bother me." The truck went over a bump; the headlights flashed up the snowbank to the trees and back down. Anna smiled in the dark truck cab.

"I'd rather you didn't talk about me at all," said Mike.

She leaned forward, asked him sharply, "You'd rather?" She smoothed her coat under seat and leaned back again.

"Anyway, he won't ask again," she said. She pulled the old woolen blanket over her lap and wrapped it around her legs.

The doctor phoned on a Monday, to say she could take Jake home the following Saturday. Anna told Mike at supper that night. She watched his face.

He was the first to speak. "I'll have to make some phone calls." He looked at her, looking down at her hands. "Hard to believe it's six weeks already."

She met his eyes then and nodded her head.

He stared for a minute at the metallic clasp on his coveralls, then got up and walked toward the phone.

"Wait!" She got up from the table. "I'll go down to the barn, let you make your calls in private."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know."

She called the dog and went down to the barn. The cows were settling in for the night. They turned their heads in surprise when the door opened and the light came on. Anna found an old milk stool, flicked the light off and sat down. The dog nestled in against her feet. The crimson glow of her cigarette moved slowly up to her mouth. A cow tossed hay into the air, to loosen it. A stanchion rattled at the other end of the barn and near Anna's head, there was the soft gurgling of water moving to fill the drinking bowls. She rested her head against the wall behind her. Jake could never understand this; what she got out of sitting by herself in the barn without a light. It made him nervous.

Anna thought about Mike, and where he was phoning. To Calgary? To a wife and family? To Armstrong, where his uncle lived? She threw her cigarette in the gutter and watched it die in the wet manure.

She remembered telling him she wouldn't leave the farm, that first day, when she showed him the property, before he touched her. Did he think she wouldn't, couldn't leave? He hadn't once said anything...about after the six weeks. She couldn't bring it up. It would have to come from him.

She imagined herself in Mike's car, driving into a city. The back seat was loaded up with her belongings. It was hot. Her shirt was stuck to her back. Her hair

needed washing. She was tired and cranky from driving a long time.

"Will we get a motel here, for tonight?" she asked.

He looked at her a long time. Didn't answer. Finally, she looked away. He was tired of her, she could tell, she could tell in his eyes.

She stood up in the barn. She lit another cigarette and threw the match into the gutter. She made a hole in the window frost with her breath. There he was, still on the phone. Then he hung up and walked across the kitchen to the back door. He was coming down to the barn. Anna reached over and flicked on the light-switch.

When the barn door opened, she was sitting on the boards of the birthing pen. Nellie, the big Holstein, rested peacefully in the hay.

"How's she doing? Any change?" he asked.

"No. Still the same. Could have been a false alarm. Did you get your calls made?"

"Yeah."

"When are you leaving?"

"Saturday morning," he said, "After chores."

"I'll make a big breakfast," she said, "Send you off with a full stomach." She looked up, smiled, and looked away again.

"Anna," he said, waiting for her to look at him,

"Will you be all right?"

"Of course," she replied, "What do you mean,

'all right'?"

"When I go, will you manage?"

"Sure. We'll just get somebody else until Jake can..."

"I don't mean that."

Mike took Anna's cigarette and with it, lit one for himself. Anna crossed her arms to hide her trembling hands. She waited for him to say more, indicate how he felt. When he didn't, she began to suspect he pitied her. She jumped down from the boards.

"And you?" she asked, flinging her head back, "What will you do with *your* broken heart? How will *you* manage?" She ground her cigarette out with her heel and stomped out of the barn.

"Anna!" Mike called after her. She pulled the barn door to, just as he got there. By the time he got the door open, turned off the lights, called the

dog...she was halfway to the house. He followed her, slowly.

Anna stormed through the kitchen, not stopping to take off her boots. Through the window, he saw her wrench open the door to the upstairs for him, drop her boots by the stove, then stride on through the living room to her bedroom.

When Mike knocked softly at her door, she didn't answer. He loaded up the stove for the night and went on up to his room.

They spent the next three days keeping out of each other's way and sleeping apart. They barely spoke. It's just as well, Anna told herself. Jake might have been able to tell, something about her attitude might have given it away. But when she ironed Mike's good shirt for the last time, she clutched it to her cheek and held it there, tightly.

She remembered how he'd knocked her over in the deep snow behind the barn. She fell, shrieking like a child, arms and legs flying every which way. And before she could right herself, he pushed her over again and the Collie ran circles around them, barking while they laughed and fell down, again and again in the snow.

The ache in her throat was too much. She went into the bathroom, in case he came into the house unexpectedly, and bracing her arms on the sink, she cried.

Outside, with the broom, Mike pushed the snow off the roof of his car.

Friday afternoon he said he was going to town. He asked Anna if she wanted anything and she just shook her head. He drove over to Salmon Arm where he picked up some wine and whiskey at the liquor store. On his way back through town, he stopped at the hotel for a beer.

A grizzled old man at the next table said, "Aren't you the guy who's working for Anna Fletcher?"

Mike took another drink of beer, nodding his head.

"Hoo-eee! That woman. Mean? I never seen the like of it. Tough as nails. That Jake's got his hands full."

Mike looked away, to the other side of the beer parlour.

The old man kept on. "I remember one year...we got Jake higher'n a kite on New Year's. That was quite a few years ago. But that woman come after us..."

Mike downed his beer and walked out.

The old man turned to the couple at the next table and he said, "Well ain't he the silly bugger?"

Anna was scraping carrots in the sink when Mike walked in.

"Look what I brought," he said, pulling out the Seagram's VO and the local dinner wine, "so we can celebrate."

She glanced at the two bottles.

Mike hung up his coat and came over to her. He put his arms around her and nestled his cheek against the back of her head. "It's our last night," he said, "Anna?"

She turned around inside his arms, smelled the beer on his breath. "You've been drinking," she said against his shirt.

"Relax," he said, "Just relax. I just had one. What are you making for supper? Smells good."

"Chicken and rice."

"No kidding? I was hoping you would."

Anna felt tears threatening. She was glad, so glad he had done it; broken the ice, she would never have been able to.

"What kind of wine did you get?" she asked, moving away. She took the bottle and examined the label.

"It's just a local dry red. *This* is the good stuff here." He showed her the bottle of rye. "We can get into this after we eat."

He crumpled up the brown bag and stuffed it into the stove. Anna finished the carrots and put them on to cook.

"Let's sit in the living room, shall we? For our last night?" said Mike, grabbing the whiskey bottle. "Have you got a couple of shot glasses?"

"I think so," said Anna. She was feeling slightly tipsy from the wine. She took two small glasses from

the cupboard and looked at them. She showed them to Mike, who was headed for the living room.

"Are these shot glasses?" she asked. Just then, one slipped from her fingers and shattered on the floor.

"Well that one is," he said.

"Is what?" she cried, bending to pick up the pieces.

"Shot."

"Oh you." She stood up and took the broom. "Go on. Get out of here before you step in it and cut yourself. I'll be in as soon as I clean this up."

They sat next to each other on the couch. Anna pulled up the coffee table and they set the bottle there, and the glasses.

"My God it looks bare," she said. "Like we're just going to sit down and drink that bottle up and that'll be that."

"Wait," said Mike. He brought the Christmas cactus over and set it next to the bottle. "Does that help?"

"Makes a world of difference," she said, laughing.

"We'll need an ashtray," he said. He stood up and looked around. "What about this?" He picked up a frail pink dish with fluted edges.

"Sure. You'll make the poor thing feel good. Nobody ever uses it. You can't tell if it's a candy dish or an ashtray. Jake won it...years ago. It was the booby prize at a Whist Drive."

Mike set the ashtray beside the plant. "There. Are we ready now?"

"Ready."

Mike poured an ounce of rye in each glass. He showed her how to link arms and they toasted.

"To us," said Mike.

"No, no," she cried, "To our six weeks."

"OK. To our six weeks." Mike tossed his back, but Anna sipped cautiously at her glass. She made a face.

"That's not the way. You have to drink it all at once, in one shot."

"Oh, OK." She drank and set her glass back on the table. "I think I have to be careful. I'm really starting to feel the alcohol. I only drink about once a year, you know, Christmas maybe, or New Year's. A person has to have something to drink *for*, something to celebrate. Celebrate? Hey, if this is a celebration, I'd better get dressed up." She started to get up.

"Wait, Anna. You look fine the way you are. Don't

change."

"But I want to. It won't take a minute. I'm just going to change my shirt. I've got this green blouse I wanted to wear a long time ago, and I never did. I'm going to put it on now."

"OK. If you want," said Mike. "I'll pour us another drink."

Anna came back, buttoning the blouse. She was laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"You won't believe this," she giggled. "When you first came, I was going to wear this blouse...because I like it, and I like how I look in it, but anyway, when I realized I was dressing up for some man...you..." She poked his shoulder with her finger, "...I just about died. And look at it." She twirled around. "It's just a blouse, not even sexy or anything, just a plain old ordinary cotton blouse. Only thing good about it is the colour."

"You do look good in it. The colour suits you."

Mike patted the seat beside him, for her to sit.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. It makes you look...oh, I don't know...kind of perky." She took the glass he handed her.

"And tomorrow I'll hang it up forever and go back to drab and dull." She drank her rye, closing her eyes and throwing it back.

"Oh Anna," he scolded.

Anna stiffened. She was talking too much. It was the alcohol. She had to watch it or she'd ruin everything. She'd ask him all the questions. Was he going back to a wife? Would she ever see him again? Hear from him? Did he love her? Had he ever thought about taking her away with him? What did he think of her, really?

Mike moved forward, began to pick at the label on the bottle. He cleared his throat and was about to speak when Anna jumped in ahead of him.

"Let's go out to the kitchen," she said, "I never did like this room. It's too formal. I like to listen to the fire in the stove...and the kettle...and the clock. Let's go back to the kitchen table, where we always sit."

"Sure. Sure," he said.

Anna grabbed her glass and the bottle and hurried out of the room.

When they were rearranged at the kitchen table, he asked if there was anything she wanted to talk about.

"I guess not," she said. "What's there to say? You're leaving tomorrow. The time's up. No sense making it any harder than it is."

"You're sure?" She nodded, but she wasn't sure. "Well...I'm glad you said what you did. I feel pretty much the same way." He reached out for her. "Let's go to bed. If I drink any more, I'll be out like a light."

She finished what was in her glass and together, they headed for her bedroom. At the door to the living room, she stopped.

"The stove," she said, "I almost forgot. You go ahead and get the bed warm. I'll fix the stove and then I'll be right in."

The chores were almost finished. Anna poured the warm milk into pails for the calves.

Mike came up and said, "I've just had a look at Nellie. She's kind of restless. She hasn't dilated any more, but just the same, I'd keep a close watch. I got a feeling she'll calf before the day is out."

"I'll keep an eye on her."

Mike bent to pick up the pails.

"Mike!" she cried, startling them both, because of the sharpness of her voice, and because she'd never used his name before.

"Leave the pails," she said, "I'll feed the calves."

Mike straightened up, eyeing her curiously.

"I want you to go now," she said, putting her fingers to his lips. "Go up to the house, pack and leave. Now. I won't come up til I see your car is gone."

"But Anna..."

"Please. I have to have it this way." She looked away then and he moved toward her.

"No! Just go." She held her hand up to keep him away. "Just go."

When he left, he closed the door gently.

“Barn Clothes” by Marlene Wildeman

Author’s Note

“Barn Clothes” was produced by Véhicule Press in Montréal, Québec in 1977, through their progressive policies toward getting emerging writers published. At the time, I was a student in the University of British Columbia’s Creative Writing Bachelor of Fine Arts program. I had gone to live in Montréal during the summer break. In the spirit of the times, I was reading from my work in various Montréal coffeehouses and was approached by a member of Véhicule Press, Dave Vessey, to consider publishing this chapbook. Five hundred copies were made. Only three remain in my possession at the time of this writing.

A year later, “Barn Clothes” was part of a submission to apply for a scholarship for Concordia University’s Master’s Program in Creative Writing in Montréal. The result was a \$2,500 scholarship for two consecutive years, beginning in 1978, which was considered a substantial sum at the time and, for me, evidence that I had a recognizable talent.

My writing was strongly influenced by the autonomous women’s movement and my activist involvement in it. This was the era of the original *women’s bookstores*, which in the 1970’s were a true novelty. Feminists struggled with criticism that our work was advancing a ‘political’ perspective and not real fiction writing, but the truth was we were advancing and legitimizing female perspectives in the course of developing our own capabilities as writers.

This manuscript was typed on a manual typewriter, where any typographical errors had to be corrected using a white (talcum powder) corrector tape. One typed over the error onto the tape, which, when successful, covered the incorrect letter(s) with white, thus restoring the blankness of the page and readying it for the correct letter(s) to be typed.

My first novel (unpublished) begins where the novella in “Barn Clothes”, “Six Weeks”, ends, for it seemed to me that the story was not yet over.

Many years later, my novella, “Six Weeks” was selected by Back Alley Productions in Toronto, Ontario to be one of eight short stories to be turned into television dramas in a series called BLISS, dedicated to ‘erotic stories

by women' which aired on Showcase. With my permission, they re-titled it "Six Days", thus modernizing it and tightening the time frame.

I am grateful to Julie Coombes of Austin, Texas who found me through Facebook and encouraged me to get this turned into a PDF file, in order that it be preserved and made available for today's reading public.

"Barn Clothes" is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in any form without the express written consent of the author.

Marlene Wildeman
Kamloops, British Columbia
April 13, 2019